

# Preserving Forest Grove

Newsletter of the Historic Landmarks Board

## Historic Châteaux in the Loire Valley

By Claude Romig

The HLB newsletter has typically been a forum for discussions of Forest Grove history and architecture. This time we felt it might be appropriate to try something different. There have been many architectural styles developed throughout the world's history, some of them grand and some absurd. In the French châteaux of the Loire Valley can be seen magnificent examples of Renaissance, Gothic and Feudal styles (to name a few). Here, then, is a brief tour of the Châteaux of the Loire.

This summer my in-laws celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary—in Belgium. Fifteen extended family members from three different countries gathered in a large house built adjacent to a 300-year old water mill in a tiny village near Bastogne. We spent a week there, taking day trips to medieval castles, ancient grottos and picturesque little villages. At night we cooked food we discovered at local markets and drank wine from local vintners. Midnight would usually find Opa and Oma drinking cuba libres and playing cards with whoever was still awake.

The week went by way too quickly; soon, my wife, our two kids and I were on our own again. We planned to meet some friends at a camp site (read luxury camping: bar, swimming pool, miniature golf) in the Loire Valley in France. We drove south through a beautiful, rolling countryside. I remember one experience in particular. It had been raining and the sun was coming out. The hay harvest was just in and the fields were stubble broken up by stands of green trees. The sun was a couple hours from setting.

The drops of rain on the hay stems glistened in the lowering sun and turned the fields to gold. Not light tan, not yellow: bright, shimmering gold.



*Château Cheverny*

We met our friends in France and set up the tents. In true Euro camping style, our friends had brought a tent that you could fit a truck in. Two separate bedrooms, a living room/kitchen and a covered porch. We, on the other hand, had borrowed a tent which, we discovered, could realistically only sleep two. Our friends graciously allowed the other two to

sleep in their tent.

It turned out that the camp site rented out bicycles. We decided to take a bike tour of the local châteaux. If we happened across a winery or two, so much the better! We found a map that had been made with cyclists in mind and which completely bypassed the main roads. There were even signs by the side of the bike paths pointing toward local sights and attractions. A mile of cornfields and hay stacks led us to our first château, Château Cheverny.

A note regarding historical context: When the French kings began constructing their huge

châteaux in the Loire Valley, the nobility, not wanting or even daring to be far from the seat of power, followed suit. Their presence in the lush, fertile valley began attracting the very best landscape designers. By the middle of the 16th century, King Francois I had shifted the center of power in France from the Loire back to the ancient capital of Paris. With him went the great architects, but the Loire Valley continued to be the place where most of the French royalty preferred to spend the bulk of their time. The ascension of King Louis XIV in the middle of the 17th century made Paris the permanent site for great royal châteaux when he built the Palace of Versailles.

Nonetheless, those who gained the king's favor, and the wealthy bourgeoisie, continued to renovate existing châteaux or build lavish new ones as their summer residences in the Loire.



*Château de Troussay*

The land on which the Château Cheverny sits was originally purchased by Henri Hurault, Comte de Cheverny and Lieutenant General of the French army in the early 1600s. Henri's son Philippe built the chateau between 1624 and 1630. The current owner is the marquis de Vibraye, also part of the Hurault family. Cheverny is a prime example of the Louis XIII classical style, distinguished by an extraordinarily symmetrical architecture. Its delicate features stand out due to the perfect whiteness of its stones, which were transported from the Bourré quarries in the Cher Valley. The building work was put under the direction of the architect, master-mason and sculptor, Jacques Bougier, who was very well-known in his time. Perhaps due to the fact that Cheverny was built all at once, the château is perfectly preserved; Cheverny has maintained

the same exterior for the last 350 years, without acquiring the smallest defect.

The interior of the château was opulent. The dining room featured 34 painted wood panels depicting the story of Cervantes' Don Quixote, then much in vogue. In the Arms Room hung suits of armor, guns and edged weapons of every variety. Rare paintings portraying classical themes, many of whose frames were gilded with gold leaf, adorned the walls. The master bedroom contained a rich, canopied bed with Persian embroidery in which

King Henri IV of France once slept.

We spent about an hour touring the chateau. Then, after a quick snack we got back on our bikes and rode off to the next chateau on the route: Château de Troussay. We went through

manicured forests, past farmers with



*Château de Chambord*



### *Château de Beauregard*

well-worn berets on their heads and hand-rolled cigarettes in their mouths. We visited a winery along the way and bought a bottle of chardonnay. We had lunch (and the bottle of wine) on an ornate wooden bench in a garden of wildflowers by an old, stone bridge which spanned the river. People waved at us. Everyone was pleasant. I had thought, what with French/American relations being the way they were, that people would be cool and aloof. I was wrong. People were friendly, gracious and eager to talk

to us. Their sense of direction, however (or our understanding of the language), was unvaryingly dreadful.

The Château de Troussay was built during the Renaissance around 1450, forty years before Columbus' epic voyages. The feudal lord at the time was Robert de Bugy, squire of King Francis I. The chateau's front façade is strongly marked by the style associated with the Chateau de Chambord: delicate and elfin. On top of the

main entrance sat a small stone Virgin, a replica of a 15th century wooden Virgin preserved at the Château de Cheverny. There was also a sundial on the right hand tower surrounded by an inscription in Latin: *Ultimam time, fuit hora, carpe diem*: "Fear the last hour, time flees, seize the day". Opposite this was a clock with a single hour hand.

The other façade was in the style of Louis XII and is a mixture of the end of the Gothic and the beginning of the Renaissance. The most beautiful example of this mixture was on the door of the tower, formerly the principal door of the chateau which was moved from the François I façade by Louis de la Saussaye because of its small size. On the door step was carved a salamander, the emblem of François I. Above the door there was an engraving, in Greek, of a sentence ascribed to the general Themistocles: "Small is the house, but oh how much happiness, if it is filled with friends."

The chateau was furnished with objects selected from radically different times and styles. The most remarkable pieces of furniture were perhaps a large armoire from Strasbourg dating from 1700 and a Louis XIII cabinet with marquetry of jasmine flowers. But there was also a vault door which came from the Château de Bury and dates from the French Renaissance. There, on one of the pilasters can be seen representations of the instruments of the Passion sculpted entirely from solid oak.

We spent an entire day on the bicycles. We visited Château de Beauregard, another of Francis I's hunting lodges. We saw Château de Chambord with its very distinct French Renaissance architecture and Château Blois, home to Henri III's mother and manipulator, Catherine de Medici. We also went to Château Chateaudun, a rare example of feudal, gothic and Renaissance architecture. In all, there are over 300 châteaux in the Loire valley. Perhaps another year, when the kids are older, we will get the opportunity to see some of these. But for now, Bon Voyage!



### ***The Forest Grove Historic Landmarks Board Grant Program***

Is your house on our local register? If it is, did you know that your house is eligible for restoration / rehabilitation grant funding? The Historic Landmarks Board has funds to help you with your projects. If you are planning any exterior restoration work such as restoring architectural features or if you have structural work to do such a foundation repair, we'd love to help. We fund projects up to 50% of the cost of the job per grant. Come see us! We can also help you find historically appropriate solutions to any problems you may have.

### ***The Forest Grove Historic Landmarks Board***

Jon Stagnitti (chair)	503-357-6369	jonstagnitti@johnlscott.com
George Cushing (secretary)	503-357-3389	greenacres2@verizon.net
Claude Romig	503-359-1886	kalekop@comcast.net
Cindy Kistler	503-359-9148	scrhk@msn.com
Margie Waltz-Actor	503-357-2770	clay.margie@verizon.net
Kevin Kamberg	503-357-8736	kevin@preemptivekarma
Neil Poulsen	503-359-7812	neil.fg@comcast.net

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***Historic Landmarks Board  
City of Forest Grove  
PO Box 326  
Forest Grove, OR 97116***

In this issue:  
Historic Châteaux in the Loire Valley

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